



•National Hospital, Abuja medical team ...rescuing the airforce plane crash victims...last year

'We miraculously survived military plane crash; but we'll fly again'

KINGSLEY OMONOBI
Abuja

MEMORIES of the September 17, 2006 Airforce DO 228 plane crash in Benue State, to which the Nigerian Army lost ten generals, two brigadier generals and a lieutenant colonel, were Friday rekindled when the two airforce cabin airmen who survived the tragedy were rewarded for gallantry by chief of the air staff, Air Marshal Paul Dike, with promotion to the rank of sergeant.

The survivors, Corporals Emmanuel Eplek and Ijuwa Esther, told *Sunday Vanguard* in separate interviews, that their survival in the plane crash was a miracle considering the hilly terrain of the area where the plane crashed but vowed however that the incident would not deter them from flying. First to speak was Eplek who is serving at the 81 Air Maritime Group, Benin. His words: "I want to thank, sincerely, the chief of air staff, Air Marshal Paul Dike, for making this day happen by our promotion. It shows that he recognized our efforts. I want to also thank God for making us survive the fatal accident.

"Really, it was a terrible experience that I don't pray for an enemy to experience. That we survived it is God's doing and I want to emphasize that it was a miracle for us to have come out of that wreckage alive and talking with you today. Regarding your question on whether it has put fear into my mind to fly, I want to say loudly that, that crash will not stop me from flying. I asked myself why I survived when people sometimes don't survive road accidents and found that God did not ordain that I die in air crash.

Continuing to fly

"So, I have developed the mind to continue to fly and, in fact, I am telling you that I will put more efforts into the job that I was trained for which is to fly. And with what our chief has done, it has motivated me the more."

On her part, Esther said, "First of all, I want to pray that this kind of accident does not happen again in this country. I mean air crash because it is a terrible and sad experience to see innocent people die just like that. The crash actually happened so unexpectedly because

• Underterred survivors vow, elevated for gallantry

everything was going fine from the beginning. For the promotion and to be alive to get decorated by our chief, I will say I am overwhelmed with joy. I give God the glory and all adoration because I was not too special than those who died.

"I am even more happy to be alive because I will have words to tell my

children. Though we are still expecting them, I believe they will come and I will tell them what God did for them and us. Infact, my mouth will have a story to tell the world because what happened to me is what they call miracle, the real miracle."

Speaking on how her husband who is also a NAF personnel took the news immediately the crash happened, Esther said, "that is another miracle to tell because my husband told those who brought the news that he believed his wife was alive. He just had the belief in God and today I am alive."

Asked what gave him the belief, she said, "I really don't know, but we are practical Christians and that may have given him faith. I want to say, however, that this accident and my survival has rekindled more patriotism in me and it will make me serve my country better."

In his remarks before their decoration, Dike noted that though flying is a high risk business, some people must do the job and that having studied, carefully, the circumstances of the crash, and the roles of the two survivors, he had no choice but to elevate them from corporals to sergeants.

Rivers of blood:

Rampaging cultists murder 20 amid Yuletide

JIMITOTA ONOYUME
Port Harcourt

CULT clashes have become a major problem in Rivers State. The clashes appear to be the most challenging task for the police in the state since 2003. For instance, within seven days, i.e. between December 25, 2006 and January 1 this year, about 20 youths lost their lives to cult clashes at different places in the state. Mr. Amadi, an indigene of the state who is deeply worried by the deplorable security situation, captured the situation when he said that no part of the state was immune from the problem. Even the villages that should ordinarily be safe havens have become the epicentre of some of the battles.

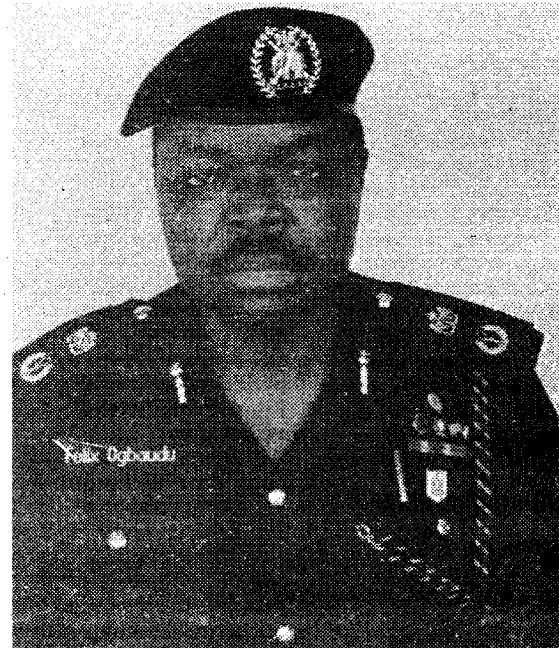
How five youths died on Christmas day: Just when many thought that the 'boys' would lay down their arms at Christmas to savor the joy of the yuletide, they struck leaving behind five dead and scores injured. Trouble started around Elelenwo area of the state shortly after a masquerade came on the street. The dancing steps of the masquerade caught the attention of both the young and old in the area. Typical of children, they immediately trooped out, dancing behind the masquerade. They

had hardly danced 100 metres when suddenly the sound of gun shots rent the air.

The shootings by cult boys who had invaded the area, sources told *Sunday Vanguard*, lasted several hours. The boys freely brandished all kinds of sophisticated weapons. At the end of the day, about five persons lay dead while several persons were said to have sustained bullet and machete wounds. "No police dared come on the street when the fight was on. After they had gone, we saw about five corpses on the ground. Many others had gun shot wounds. We are even suspecting that some of the boys may have fled with the corpses of their friends", an eye witness said.

It is not clear if any of the warring groups whose clash the shootings heralded had anything to do with the masquerade. But *Sunday Vanguard* gathered that the clash was between two rival cult groups with their separate bases at Rumukrushi and Elelenwo.

Rumuekini killings: The story was not different at Rumubiakani in Obio Akpo Local Government area of the state. This time, about nine persons lost their lives in the early hours of January 1, following a clash between rival



•Rivers police commissioner, Ogbaidu...herculean task

groups. According to community sources, one of the groups had slated its annual initiation/party for a forest in the area. They had prepared for the ceremony such that there was so much to eat and drink. The sources said they used palm fronds to build a fence round the spot for the show. Unknown to them, the rival group had got wind of their plans and had immediately sent spies to monitor the place and feed them (the other group) back with blow by

blow account of how things were going on there. When celebration reached feverish pitch, the spies, according to sources, alerted their other members who drove straight to the spot in a bus loaded with sophisticated weapons. When they got there, the first thing they did was to encircle the place. When they were sure of their vantage point, they started shooting sporadically, killing virtually everybody in the arena.

"My brother, it was a gory sight. I am sure nobody escaped from that hall. When some of us got there the following morning to see things for ourselves, some of the corpses were still lying on the ground. We saw one warmer full of rice, another had meat. There were drums on one side of the arena. We also saw some things that looked like charms. We don't know if they belonged to the deceased boys or they dropped from the group that invaded the place. Many lives were wasted at that place", a community source lamented.

Nobody could say the number of people killed. Some gave the number of victims as fifteen. "But I am very sure they were more than that because we understand that relatives of some of the deceased persons who got wind of the incident, earlier rushed there to remove their corpses." This could be true because when media men got there later that day, they saw one corpse still lying on the ground.

After the cultists murderous act, as they were driving out of the area, sources said their bus ran into a vigilante in the heart of the town who demanded to know where they were coming from. Rather than provide answer to the question, they reportedly pumped several volleys of bullets into the community youth leader who died on the spot. A similar incident happened at a club on the same day in the state where about three persons were reportedly gunned down.

Cult clash is obviously going to be one of the major problems the new police boss in the state, Mr. Felix Ogbaidu, would be confronting. In 2006 alone, about 40 youths lost their lives at separate incidents in the state. Bodo, Emohua, and nearly all parts of the state capital have become hot spots for the menace. In Bodo alone, about 25 youths were consumed in a clash between Dewell and Debam which spanned over three months. At a time, members of the former would slaughter members of the latter and dump them in any well close to the scene of the murder. According to sources, they acted this way, because, as the name Dewell indicates, the well should be the victims final resting place. No relatives of the deceased dared go to retrieve the corpses from the well.

The police in Rivers State appeared helpless as the boys brandished superior fire power. The security situation degenerated in Bodo to the extent that a mobile policeman was disarmed in broad day light by one of the cult groups. *Sunday Vanguard* learnt that the rifle seized from the cop was released only after negotiations by the police.

Herculean task: Another task the police may have to contend with in its bid to rid the state of gangsterism and cultism is how to deal with those behind the boys. Findings have shown that these cult

groups have the backing of top politicians in the state while high ranking members of the government have been fingered as their financiers. They use these boys to fight political battles in their territories. How far this new commissioner of police can go in this fight against the scourge will determine what his score card would be like at the end of the day particularly in this election year.